

CURRENT ISSUE ORAL PRESENTATION – 2005

Background:

The Big Thicket National Preserve consists of nine land units and six water corridors encompassing more than 97,000 acres. The Big Thicket was the first preserve in the National Park System and was established on October 11, 1974. The preserve encompasses a seven-county area with units in Hardin, Liberty, Polk, Tyler, Jefferson, Orange, and Jasper Counties. Since the Big Thicket National Preserve was not established until 1974, the following background information serves to include the entire geographical region of the big thicket, which may or may not be a part of the present day preserve.

What is the Big Thicket? Definitions are based on the big thicket as a plant growth region dependent on climate, soils, and drainage. McLoad states that the big thicket is: a loblolly pine- hardwood association, with the hardwoods being southern magnolia, beech, white oak, and in some areas, swamp chestnut oak.

A quote from Professors Thomas Eisner and Paul Feeny in a 1972 congressional hearing states that: “It is fair to say that though the region (the big thicket) lacks spectacular natural grandeur, it is, from an ecological standpoint, better deserving of preservation than any existing National Park in the U.S., with the possible exception of the Florida Everglades. Nowhere else is there found such a diversity of plant and animal species: nowhere else is there such a unique combination of habitats; northern temperate and subtropical and western and humid southeastern, freshwater and saltwater, forest and prairie, calcareous and acid.”

As with any place, the culture and history of the geographical region of the big thicket has played a key role in its present state. The big thicket was once thought of as a “no-mans” land, where outlaws, escaped prisoners, slaves, and others who did not agree with the law of the time sought shelter.

The big thicket region is home to many historic Native American cultures. The Alabama-Coushatta Tribes are still active in the big thicket region practicing their cultural heritage. The park service consults with the tribe to manage cultural sites within the preserve. There are many Native American sites that have yet to be inventoried by the park service within the reserve. Environmental processes such as temperature, vegetation growth, and moisture are affecting the unknown and known cultural resources.

Homesteaders with an independent nature settled areas of the big thicket region. They brought with them livestock that were allowed to roam free within the thicket. Many homesteaders relied on subsistence hunting and gathering to survive. They hunted feral hogs and bear for food and recreational fun. Bears were hunted so heavily that they disappeared from the thicket. The park service has sent representatives to meetings of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department regarding the study and reintroduction of these native mammals. Texas Parks and Wildlife has concluded that the reintroduction of Black Bears is not necessary since bears are coming in naturally from Arkansas and Louisiana. Unfortunately, the hogs never had the problems that faced the bears. The feral hog population has expanded to the point that they are a threat to the big thicket in terms of destroying wildlife and vegetation. It is not known how many wild hogs roam the big thicket and surrounding areas, nor is the extent of damage they may be doing to plant and animal species known. Species, such as frogs, salamanders, endangered or rare plants, etc., are all at risk of being destroyed. The hogs act similar to a Rota-tiller, while looking for food they indiscriminately root-up and eat anything that crosses their path.

There was a time when the big thicket region had large tracts of virgin forestland. Beginning in the 1840’s and lasting through the 1930’s, the forests of the region were logged for their extensive timber. Most of the big tall virgin stands of trees have all been cut at least once. There are hardly any more big timber trees left and the remnant stands are difficult to reach. Pines for pulp are still available through managed timber company lands.

Starting in the 1900’s a second force entered the big thicket region at the famous Spindletop field south of Beaumont and spreading northwestward into the thicket at Sour Lake, oil, with its shanty settlements, pipelines, and oil and saltwater overflows.

In a sense, oil and timbering were two versions of the same thing: an “extractive” economy, quick to appropriate raw materials and oblivious to the results. The effects of oil faded slowly, if at all, in contrast to the effects of timbering. Many effects are still marked clearly on the land: barren acreage underlain by saltwater and oil sediment, where the earth is still raw clay or sand, or where trees and bushes grow only until their roots reach the black, viscous mud underground, and then die. Perhaps the oil boom would have lasted longer and had more devastating impacts, but there was not an economically viable way to refine the raw material. With the disappearance of this oil boom, the thicket was able to rest for about 40 years.

With the price of oil and gas on the rise, the Big Thicket National Preserve is receiving pressure to begin and continue drilling on preserve lands. The National Park Service does not own the mineral rights within the preserve, and cannot deny an individual or company access to drilling. Currently, there are 26 plus active wells on Preserve units. These areas present a much more complex array of issues than did the wells in the earlier part of the 1900’s. Issues include, but are not limited to, an array of disturbances such as noise and light pollution, water quality, roads through the forest, loss of habitat for wildlife (just the pads necessary for drilling can occupy up to two acres of land and the area of land surrounding the pipelines are generally between 30-250 feet, and must be kept open and free of all vegetation). The park service does have influence on where the pads are placed, so they can negotiate placement to protect sensitive sites. With the addition of these disturbances the land then becomes very fragmented.

Mock Situation and Problem:

- The SQH Oil and Gas Company would like to drill on a culturally sensitive site in the big thicket. This site has Indian mounds that have never been examined, but the company is sure this is a prime site for drilling. It will put Texas back on the map as a major gas and oil producer. They are preparing an Environmental Impact Statement for the area and have invited the public to a hearing.
- The old Dubey Mill Site, which is part of the park's cultural landscape, is being lost to environmental process. Vegetation is overgrowing the buildings, and moisture and high temperature are rotting the structures. Not only is the foundation getting weak, but feral hogs are destroying the area surrounding the mill. They are literally rooting up and mixing the layers of soil in and around the mill. Any artifacts that the hogs have come across are either stepped on and broken or moved from their original site. Archeologists need the correct layers of the soil intact to discover how long the Dubey Mill has been there, what cultures were present, the time span of the mill, and what artifacts may have been left. It is crucial that the layers of soil are left intact and undisturbed to preserve the area.
- Looters or "pot hunters" are going through and stealing irreplaceable pieces of culture from the Indian mounds located within the park boundaries. The mounds located near the Neches River are particularly rich in artifacts and important to the cultural heritage of the Native Americans.
- Much of the land surrounding the Big Thicket N.P. is owned by several timber and timber related companies. The Allison Timber Company, Koch Lumber Mill, and the Moore Timber Land Company often cut large areas of timber, which some would refer to as clear-cutting. Clear-cutting is not allowed on the preserve, but clear-cutting is a neighbor issue. While timber companies practice clear-cutting techniques on lands surrounding the preserve, these areas do serve to benefit the preserve as a buffer from urbanization. However, with clear-cutting, the diverse original forests with their understory of small trees and shrubs, their thick growth of vines, flowers, and ferns are often removed from the ecosystem. The end result is a monoculture: one tree species, which is usually pine.
- Another great treat to the big thicket region is development along the Neches River bottom. Ecologically they are rich, diverse and interesting, but economically they tend to be liabilities and prone to flooding. As complexes of swamps, seeps, oxbows, and meanders, they are often poor country to grow commercial timber, support cattle, or a subdivision, but could be sources for oil, gas, or used for recreational purposes.

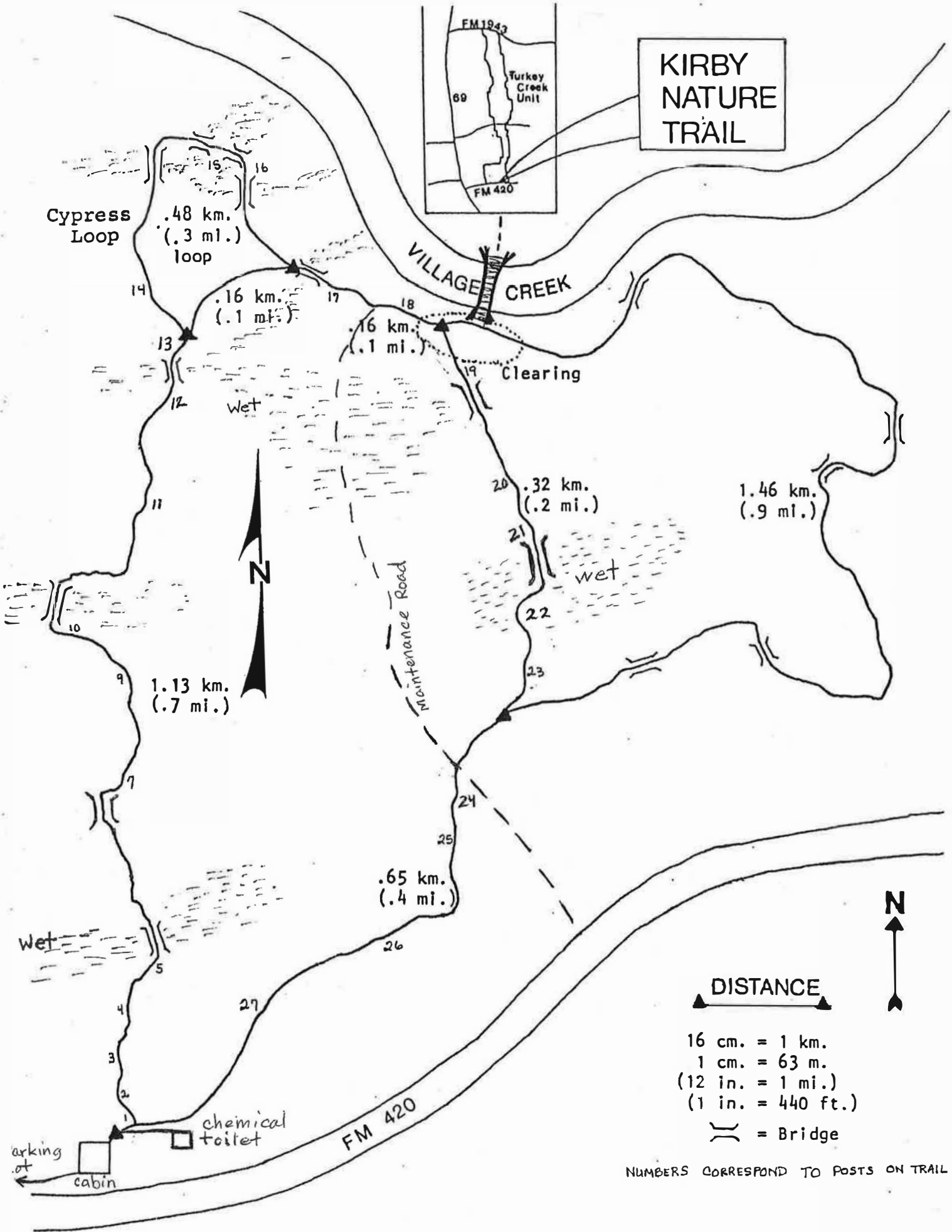
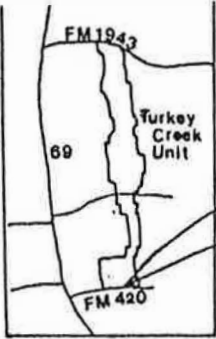
- Flooding is another issue for the big thicket area. Often, temporary residents and vacationers utilize these flood-prone areas. For example, the Go-Go Subdivision and the Wall-eye fishing camp have many small cabins that can be rented out and are great weekend get-aways. In addition, some of the flood prone areas are used as industrial sites. In the last twenty years, southeast Texas has experienced three hundred-year floods. Everything tends to be swept down into the Gulf of Mexico.
- The Windy Outdoor & Hiking Association, a local non-profit, wants the Turkey Creek Unit to be buffered and connected to the new visitors center at US 69 and FM 420. They also want corridor for a hiking trail to be established between the Turkey Creek unit and the visitor's center. As an added incentive, an addition of 4000 acres or more would be desirable to prevent development along FM 420. The Hickory Creek Unit is hemmed in by the Wildland subdivision on the west side. The acquisition of 800 acres is needed to serve as a buffer so that the rare Longleaf Pine and baygall ecosystems can be protected and managed with natural or prescribed fire. The Neches River is a good canoeing stream in Texas and additional floodplain acquisition in the watershed would protect some of the wildest forestland left in East Texas. Buffering other units would protect them from many of the effects of suburbanization and resource development.

Problem:

The Big Thicket National Preserve is in dire need of a management plan for its cultural landscapes. Currently, the Big Thicket N.P. does not have a full archeological survey of where these sensitive areas are located. Since they do not know for certain what they have, how can they know what they are losing? It is your charge to develop a General Management Plan for Preserving the Cultural Landscapes of the Big Thicket N.P. while considering the many players associated with the Big Thicket N.P. The plan will provide guidance for the preserve's overall cultural management. You will determine how the preserve will address resource and cultural management, visitor use, land protection and park operation issues for the next 10-15 years. You should consider not only the environmental impact of your plan, but also the impact on the social, cultural, political, and economic aspects of your plan on the Big Thicket N.P. You should consider the following questions:

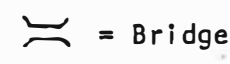
- How could you address these issues? How could you ensure that the cultural resources are protected, the integrity of the landscape is preserved, ensure public safety, and recognize the rights of mineral owners to develop their oil and gas resources?
- What actions would you propose the park service take to preserve this cultural landscape and how can they control the feral hogs?
- How would you propose to ensure that these artifacts are preserved while realizing that the park service is limited in funds and manpower?
- Are companies and industries worth the tax bases in order to have cattle, wild hogs, or oil wells on or near the preserve?

KIRBY NATURE TRAIL



DISTANCE

- 16 cm. = 1 km.
- 1 cm. = 63 m.
- (12 in. = 1 mi.)
- (1 in. = 440 ft.)



= Bridge

NUMBERS CORRESPOND TO POSTS ON TRAIL